

Intimacy, Othering and National Ideologies in Voluntary Tourism – A case study

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Abstract

According to scholarly literature two interrelated areas of motivations play an important role in grounding 'voluntourist' endeavours. A self-centered desire for difference, for the Other as exotic, typical of mass tourism is completed by a desire for personal contact with hosts imbued with relations of care, and often emotional closeness and intimacy.

The 'advocacy' literature regards the later motive as leading to more inclusive, egalitarian encounters between volunteers and hosts that may counteract the relations of domination and hierarchy mass tourism (re)creates; however a more critical strand sees the structural inequalities and discourses of otherness hindering such spaces of open communication and equal disclosure besides benevolent intentions. Instead of taking a radical position, my paper aims to analyse conditions and processes of creating such intimate spaces in volunteer-host encounters. How hierarchies produced by discourses and narratives of otherness relate to the creation of intimacy characterized by emotional closeness, care and concern for each other? How is the seeming paradox of hierarchy and distance as opposed to equality and proximity managed by volunteers and hosts?

Such questions will be examined based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in voluntary programs organized in Hungary, directed towards supporting ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries of Ukraine and Romania. The role of national ideologies - especially of national authenticity and (national) traditions - comprising of paradoxical narratives of national sameness and difference in managing intimate relations will also be briefly discussed.

A special form of migration has been increasingly studied in the last two decades: the hybrid institution of (international) touristic movement completed with charitable/philanthropic aims and activities became labeled as voluntary tourism. An example of definitions is McGehee and Santos's: they define volunteer tourism as "utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need." (McGehee and Santos, 2005, p.760).

This new research field defined its subject against mass tourism. Critics regarded mass tourism as part of the global neoliberal market-economy, driven by individualistic and hedonistic desires of consumers commodifying and objectifying places and people, and where morality and justice had no space to unfold (Alsayyad 2001). A first wave of research later labeled as the "advocacy literature" welcomed the development and institutionalization of voluntary touristic practices, focusing on the motivations of voluntary tourists. The intentions self-consciously formulated by the actors themselves in terms of altruism, the desire to "do good", to help others and the community, and to connecting with hosts have been interpreted by these authors as the guarantees of emancipation, which directly counteract Urry's "touristic gaze" exoticizing and othering places and communities. (Brown 2013, McKintosh and

Zahra 2007, Alomari 2011) From this perspective altruistic motivations de-objectify the host community and ensure an equal and inclusive relationship between tourists and hosts. A different stream of research was directed towards demystifying the advocacy-gaze on voluntary tourism. They showed that besides benevolent intentions power and domination may still be blended into these relations: voluntary touristic endeavours may lead to the neglect of local desires and the reinforcement of conceptualisations of the other. (Guttentag 2009, Raymond)

In what follows we attempt to contribute to this discussion about the working of power and domination in tourist-host encounters. Partly adhering to the motivations-literature, we acknowledge and assume the presence of desires of voluntary tourists directed towards personal interactions and personal connections with members of host communities. On the other hand, without understanding such motivations as self-explanatory, resulting in the flattening of power hierarchies, we attempt to analyse processes and contextual factors that may reinforce or weaken such relations between guests and hosts. In the analysis we build upon critical theoretical notions of recognition and care. (Honneth 1992, Fraser 2003, Honneth and Fraser 2003, Gilligan 1982) In using analytically clarified notions of love, care and recognition, two possible research directions in voluntary tourism research may be linked together: filling the gap of critical theoretical perspectives in analyzing power relations of voluntary tourist encounters (Mc Gehee 2012) is coupled with fulfilling the need for highlighting the role of affect (shame, guilt, concern) in such encounters. (Gibson 2009)

According to the justice approach to recognition, every human has the right to participate in interactions equally with others. Equal participation rests on two conditions: first, material resources are required that enable the individual to act and to have a voice in interactions. Second, just and equal participation assumes that statuses („institutional patterns of cultural values”, Fraser 2003) allow equal positions for acting and speaking for all participants. The other approach to recognition focuses instead on the conditions of subject formation. According to Honneth, subjects are formed in interactions and communication through processes of recognition. Recognition is an idealtypical mutual relationship, in which the subject perceives herself equal as well as distinct with and from the other. Such relationships are preconditions of the formation of autonomous subjects, thus the lack of recognition may be criticised as hindering such subject formation. The existence or lack of recognition phenomenologically may be perceived through emotional and affective states of participants: its positive effect is emotional security and self-confidence, while its lack causes shame and humiliation.

Honneth highlights a primary form of recognition labelled as love, that is directed towards the fulfillment of physical and emotional needs of close and distinguished others (family members and friends). This primary mode of recognition is close to the notion of ethics of care theorised by feminist moral philosophers and psychologists. (Gilligan 1982, Pulcini 2012)

In this paper these two normative approaches will be parallelly examined: (1) first, unequal freedom for action and meaning creation will be analysed (2) emotional states of participants – with a major focus on hosts – will also be followed.

We depart from the assumption that ideological, discursive background of such encounters deeply affect and confine inequalities of action and meaning construction,

as well as the emotional experience of participants. In the first part of our presentation, we aim at describing the working of discourses in the analysed voluntary touristic movements. In the second part we focus on possible phenomena and processes that may counteract such inequalities and hinder emotional experience that undermine autonomous subjectivities.

Ideologies of voluntary tourism supporting ethnic Hungarian minorities

A characteristic form of voluntary tourism in Hungary is closely linked to the imperative of helping ethnic Hungarian minorities of neighbouring countries. A core narrative of such helping imperative is formed around the discourse of minority societies and their national culture being under constant threat. This discourse uses a historically and culturally unified, homogenous concept of the Hungarian nation that includes Hungarian communities living in neighbouring states, and ignores the diversified history of these minority communities as well as advancing processes of assimilation into the majority society in some of these communities¹. According to this culturalising discourse, these Hungarians are characterized by a national authenticity, guarding the most ancient, most original, most valuable elements of the Hungarian culture; are taking up this role of guarding the national culture actively and consciously; and are under the constant pressure of assimilation on the part of the majority society. Based on this discourse, these minority groups need the help of the mother country and its population in maintaining the Hungarian national culture and resisting assimilation. This discourse emphasising the preservation of Hungarian national culture and the national community as a goal in itself, often integrates a more individualistic human and minority rights discourse as well.

The alternative of the discourse of threatened national culture is a modernisation discourse. The modernisation discourse is a global hierarchical classification system that measures positions according to their level of modernisation and civilization. (Melegh 2006) The system has an idealised Western Europe as reference point, while all other positions are measured according to their distance (belatedness) on the modernisation/civilisation axis. In the Hungarian context, the slope is projected onto Eastern Europe implying a civilizational contest that is triumphed by Hungary as opposed to other countries. (Melegh 2006) Although in the last decade there is a reconsideration of this Hungarian regional economic and civilisational superiority, the former concept still stays alive in public discourses.

Furthermore, the modernisation hierarchy is also projected onto the Hungarian nation, creating internal East-West hierarchies: it states the heavy economic circumstances, economic and cultural underdevelopment and lack of civilisation of ethnic Hungarian minority communities residing in “less modernised” countries of Ukraine, Romania, Serbia.² Based on common national belonging, the responsibility of Hungarians of Hungary should cover not only the preservation of national identity and culture in these minority groups, but also should take part in their material support, modernisation and development.

The outlined discursive field is in great part produced and maintained by intervention and assistance policies of the Hungarian state. (Bárdi 2013, Zombory

¹ Assimilation refers here to specific processes of inter- and intragenerational language change, intermarriage, inter- and intragenerational changes of national identification. With a special focus on language use see Fenyvesi (2005), especially chapters 4-5-6.

² In case of ethnic Hungarians of Romania see Feischmidt 2005, Kürti 2002.

2012) These policies stretch over the classic terrain of state responsibilities that is the community of citizens. The principle of transborder responsibility is part of the Hungarian constitution, both the old and the new³. Besides diversity of their actual form and content, a wide consensus is in place among different governments around the necessity of such support.

This helping discourse affects however spheres outside the state as well: private individuals and formal or informal voluntary associations. Large philanthropic organisations, such as the Maltese and the Hungarian Red Cross often have their specific division or programmes directed towards Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring states, and there is a multitude of smaller associations, family, church, workplace communities that organise such support. Voluntary tourism lies at the core of such charities: volunteers offer their free time and travel to these places to do voluntary work or just carry donations to their destinations.⁴

Field and methods

The analysed association founded in 2007 aims at supporting Hungarian language education in Csángó (ceangai) villages in Moldova, Romania, inhabitants of whom are considered by national discourses as part of the historical Hungarian nation. The association seeks donations by establishing a long-term quasi-familial relationship between the donor and recipient: the former becomes the symbolic god-parent of a Csángó child, the relationship being maintained through letters, gifts, and trips between Hungary and Moldova. The less active god-parents may only restrain their activities to paying a certain sum of money to support Hungarian language education; however, god-parents are also expected to pay visits in summer-camps organized for these children in Hungary, or directly in their home villages in Moldova.

These findings are based on participant observation and semi-structured and narrative interviews carried out in 2009-2010. 12 formal interviews have been carried out with godparents in Budapest, and 8 with god-children and their parents in one Csángó village. I also attended 3 trips of groups of god-parents travelling from Budapest to visit Csángó villages and their god-children in Moldova.

Interactions embedded in discourses of power

1. The modernization discourse

God-parents are middle class entrepreneurs, managers, health-, education-, cultural professionals, all being able to afford to participate in the program. Those who travel from time to time to Moldova are even better off, as the 900 km distance journeys cost substantial resources regarding free time and money. The supported children live in an economically depressed rural area of Romania, the majority of their parents

³ „The Republic of Hungary bears a sense of responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living outside its borders and shall promote and foster their relations with Hungary.” *The Constitution of the Republic of Hungary*, 6. §. “ Bearing in mind that there is one single Hungarian nation that belongs together, Hungary shall bear responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living beyond its borders, and shall facilitate the survival and development of their communities; it shall support their efforts to preserve their Hungarian identity, the assertion of their individual and collective rights, the establishment of their community self-governments, and their prosperity in their native lands, and shall promote their cooperation with each other and with Hungary.” The Fundamental Law of Hungary, Foundations, Article D.

⁴ National heritage tourism directed towards 'ethnic Hungarian' places in neighbouring countries is widely discussed by Ilyés (2014)

working on the secondary labour market, being able to afford large distance travels only as part of labour migration.

In volunteer-host encounters a modernisation discourse is built upon these objective inequalities of socio-economic positions. East-West, rural-urban, developed vs. undeveloped, civilized vs. uncivilised dichotomies are projected upon each other, affecting the ways voluntary tourists perceive their hosts. Perceptions also have their effects on their behavior, which in turn makes these hierarchical regards visible for the hosts as well. Independently whether these regards reflect a negative, rejecting attitude (usually on the terrain of bodily hygiene)⁵, or an attitude valuing, recognizing the host community by romanticizing, idealizing traditionality and authenticity, and estheticizing poverty, their meaning for the hosts may be the same. That is being perceived as less affluent, less modern, less civilised as their guests.

Such potential gestures, talks, categorisations imply the emotions of shame and humiliation for those witnessing them, and as such result in an elevated state of distrust and suspicion towards newly arrived guests. In moments of such humiliation, as a result of shame and the feeling of inadequacy the hosts usually are defenseless, remain mute, without any reaction, and reinterpret the experience just later with others. „*There was a couple who were not so kind. (...) They talked like «oh my god, what a poverty». It happened once, I don't want to talk about it. They didn't tell it to me, I just happened to hear how they talked between themselves. The others are really nice.*” (Mother of god-child, accomodating voluntary tourists at their house on a regular basis.)

The threat of such hierarchical perceptions, that is lack of recognition, may also undermine interactions of donating and gift giving aimed at some kind of poverty alleviation. Voluntary tourists often aim to bring substantial amount of gifts and donations to their supported families and communities, such as clothes, food, books, computers. However, the frequent question “*What do you need that we could bring along?*” is usually turned down by hosts, who rather choose to maintain their status in the interaction by refusing the position of the needy.

2. National discourses

The other layer of voluntary touristic activities directed towards ethnic Hungarian minorities is the national ideology. The romanticizing view of Hungarian volunteers about Moldovan Csángós assumes a self committed attitude and conscious struggle for their assumed Hungarianness, their Hungarian language use and Hungarian identity. These communities however are in a late phase of assimilation into the Romanian mainstream language and national identity, resulting that these views are deeply alien to and incompatible with Csángó lifeworlds. Assimilation as a mobilization strategy in these villages also implies that meanings associated with Hungarianness: local Hungarian dialects, folklore and traditions are all understood by locals as cultural signs of undercivilisation and lack of development.

Among such circumstances, the voluntary tourists' goals of supporting minority struggles are extremely difficult to translate into actions and interactions. The initial goals of support and helping become gestures of continuous vigilance and control on the part of visitors to enforce Hungarian language use and identification. Which are, in turn, perceived by locals as a violent intrusion into their lifeworlds, and

⁵ „Mihai, how many times do you have a bath a week?” (A god-father asking a local boy)

confinement of their freedom. Moreover, as Hungarianness is associated with the lower end of modernization slope, these attempts are also perceived as an enforcement of their inferior position, that is as lack of recognition.

„Two years ago, it was so bad, Tamás [another godfather] started to scold Anne, the local girl, who cooked for us, that why you don't speak Hungarian. And why you all, Csángós don't speak Hungarian. At the end Anne almost cried, and said: Yes, we all have to learn a lot, we are really underdeveloped.” (András, god-father)

The possibilities of resistance

As we saw, both aims of alleviating poverty, that is donations, and aims of supporting the maintenance of Hungarianness constitute a continuous threat for the locals. The danger of being prescribed what to do, as well as humiliation by denigrating perspectives of the visitors result in distrust and a feeling of insecurity for the hosts. Different strategies exist on the part of voluntary tourists and hosts to reconstruct identities through recognition.

An overwhelming reaction on the part of locals is to (re)interpret voluntary touristic activities in terms of (mass) tourism. According to this perspective, voluntary tourists' major aims are hedonistic and self-directed: visiting interesting places, and being accommodated in nice and comfortable ways. Helping intentions become entirely invisible, covering the socioeconomic hierarchy and the modernization discourse behind such encounters. *“They [visitors from Hungary] come to see the beautiful Monasteries, and because we treat them well. They got used to this place.” (Erzsike, mother of a god-child, accommodating voluntary tourists on a regular basis).* The frequent arrival of godparents, or other visitors from Hungary become a source of pride and recognition, while hierarchic relations of support entirely disappearing from such interpretations. Also, ambiguities and misunderstandings of ethnic categories and national identifications and categorisations are eliminated through these interpretations.

A different strategy to avoid threats of being denied recognition is the mobilization of relations of care between volunteers and hosts.

The establishment of symbolic familial ties is “logical” and easy to understand for Hungarian volunteers, based on the metaphor of “nation as a family”. This language construct helps to imagine the nation as built up of families, and a big family itself, making the relations of care, typical of family relations, transferable to larger national scale. As the national metaphor is unavailable in the Moldovan lifeworlds, such relationship is more difficult to construct. *“We were unaware that people in Hungary like to have god-children abroad.” (Erzsike, mother of a god-child)* The role of the usually well-respected Hungarian language teachers living in these villages, as well as the actual value of personal contacts in Hungary can not be underestimated in making local families cooperate.

These long-term commitments are also founded through sending and receiving post-mails by god-children and god-parents, as well as the latter sending packages with gifts (clothes, food, books, electronic equipments). Personal encounters are often cathartic moments of creating strong emotional ties between godparents and their godchildren.

„I committed myself to the whole program, when I first met my god-daughter. I wrote letters for a year, sent pictures of myself, and they told me how long and interesting

the letter was, and how she was happy that she has such an interesting god-mother. And that day, she was so excited, had a shower, because her godmother comes. And then I entered, and a 14 year old girl came to me, crying hard, and said «I was so much looking forward to your coming, so good that you arrived». And she hugged me, and I felt that I had known her for my entire life. That was the moment of my overall commitment.”

In care relationships bodily, material, emotional needs are primarily determined by those cared for, and are communicated towards carers, who by „self-limitations” intend to satisfy them. Such tendencies are characteristic of the relationships between god-parents and god-children: a strong desire of finding out and fulfilling the needs and desires of the latter are ubiquitous in these relations. Such desires could be directed towards material goods, or common activities, but may also stretch over supporting long-term plans of children, such as high-school and secondary education. In these institutionalised care relations donation becomes an easy-going and logical activity for both parties: prescribed roles of children in such (quasi) familial relations allow them not only to accept gifts, but to actively initiate, form and define such gift-giving activities. Children may receive, and may be cared for as a normal way of life, without needing further explanation, such as socio-economic or modernisation inequalities. As such, the threat of denigrating effects of the modernisation discourse may disappear as well.

Care relations also may imply a disruption in the use of nationalist ideologies. Empathetic attitudes of the carers give them access to local perspectives, and allows for understanding the role of national and ethnic orientations of their god-children. Long term emotional commitment, as well as the quasi-parental responsibilities independent of merits imply an adjustment to the perspectives of god-children, and a support stretched over national boundaries.⁶ *“We had a hard time, when Alina, my goddaughter decided to go to a Romanian language secondary school. We had such a good relationship for so many years, and after all we will loose everything? So we were shocked, and we were talking about this a lot, in the family. But after all, we decided that Alina should stay as part of our family. If she can work only in a Romanian environment, she needs to study in Romanian, isn’t it? So we are still in a good relationship. But this episode had changed many things for me. About helping others, without restrictions and without expecting anything back.” – Godmother, 50*

Conclusions

In the present paper we analysed the working of power in encounters between volunteer tourists and members of host communities. Recent literature on voluntary tourism drew attention to the working of discourses in tourist-host encounters, and the threat of reproducing dominance and power hierarchies besides benevolent intentions of visitors. As Wearing and McGehee put it “How these cultural worlds are accessed and experienced is influenced by the socially constructed nature of otherness in tourist experiences, the resistance and subversion of host cultures to this programmatic coding, and the counter-discourses to the gaze/surveillance of power.”

We examined such discourses and counter-discourses applying the normative critical theoretical framework of recognition, love and care, which enabled us to understand

⁶ Ibid., 50.

the working of power through a phenomenological lens with a major perspective on the experience of hosts. Such approach also enabled us to contribute to the less covered research area on host perspectives in voluntary tourism.

In this case study on a voluntary association aiming to support ethnic Hungarian communities in Moldova, Romania, the working of a modernization discourse coupled with national ideologies has been shortly described. A possible resistance on the part of the hosts is the reinterpretation of voluntary tourism in terms of “mass tourism”, in such a way that hosting activities and encounters become understood as equal relations, and became a source of pride and recognition for locals. Also, through institutionalizing quasi-familial relations between volunteers and hosts, intimate relations of care, emotional attachment and concern, “third spaces” of encounters were born. In such care relations donations and support towards host communities became realizable, without threatening recipients with depriving them of recognition. In the space of such relations denigrating discourses of under-development, and national ideologies of domination have been shaded.

In line with moral theorists’ concerns, the generalisability of such caring relations, that is the widening of the caring perspectives beyond certain individuals or families is variable among the volunteers. The political implications of care on our field will be analysed in a different paper.